

AED/LearnLink

ICT Applications for Development

AED/LearnLink uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development. Activities range from public access telecenters to teacher training, professional development, organizational networking, e-commerce, e-government, and institutional capacity building. Lessons from field experiences are shared to contribute to the body of knowledge on using ICTs for development.



Keyword Identifiers: telecenter, economic development, e-commerce, public-private partnership

Purpose: To create viable telecenter businesses in communities lacking modern information and communications technologies (ICTs); to promote social and economic development in small towns and rural areas through ICT access; to help extend the benefits of ICTs to educational and social service sectors; to increase digitized Bulgarian-language content focused on socioeconomic development; to assess the impact of usage subsidies to selected groups to promote PC3 use; and to contribute a new model to the global telecenter experience.

Description: Starting in September 2000, this pilot project provides entrepreneurs with funds and technical assistance to establish Public Computer and Communication Centers (PC3s). On a fee-for-use basis, PC3s offer a mix of information-based products and services, such as Internet access, email accounts, CD-ROMs, desktop publishing, telephone, fax, and photocopying. Later, more advanced activities can be offered, including training in computer and Internet use and applications, web site development, and e-commerce for small and medium-sized businesses. Established outside major cities, PC3s are designed to meet the needs of communities of 5,000-30,000 and may be owned and run by individuals, businesses, or local organizations.

To stimulate PC3 use, especially by educational and social service groups, and to minimize risks for the business partners, prepaid access cards that can be exchanged for PC3 products and services of equivalent value are distributed to students and teachers, health workers, agricultural cooperatives, and other "change agents."

Scope of Work: After issuing a Request for Proposals, LearnLink selects individuals and organizations wishing to operate PC3s. To help operators establish their businesses, reduce initial financial risks, and build client demand, LearnLink assists with PC3 business planning and computer and network design. Other assistance includes supplying PC3s with some Internet connectivity subsidies and computer and network equipment, and distributing pre-paid access cards, redeemable for PC3 services, to potential users. To increase



A small telecenter serves a full house in Bankya

Dennis Foote

Bulgarian language computer-based and Internet-accessible content on economic and social development, LearnLink digitizes existing material, translates others, and then distributes content to PC3 operators to offer their clients. Finally, LearnLink monitors use and outcomes and documents useful lessons for future activities.

Desired Outcomes: Each PC3 is intended to become an independent, self-supporting business. Operators should be able to sustain profitable enterprises and gain experience in operating the PC3, maintaining its equipment, and providing quality customer service. Small business spin-offs, such as the sale of peripherals, desktop publishing, and equipment repair, are expected to emerge from the PC3 presence in the local economy. Successful PC3s should make it possible for local residents, including the educational and social service sectors, to have better access to information and communication options. Bulgarians can access and apply the Bulgarian-language content, relevant to social and economic development, that is digitized and put on the Internet or CD-ROMs.



Private telecenter in Septemvri (a town southeast of Sofia)

In the long term, affordable access to modern ICTs is expected to stimulate economic growth in the communities served by increasing competitiveness, catalyzing the launch of spin-off businesses, contributing to higher levels of employment, and connecting mid- and low-income communities to the global economy. Social development is expected by increasing education and training opportunities, improving communication, and facilitating the provision of government and social services to underserved populations outside urban centers. Finally, the project is expected to demonstrate to USAID and its partners that this telecenter model is feasible and can be profitable and sustainable.

Key Challenges: The further a community is from Bulgaria's largest cities, the greater is the gap in economic development. Infrastructure and access to ICT hardware outside cities is limited. Few Internet service providers (ISPs) operate outside urban areas, and where they do, fees are almost twice as high as in cities. Less than 10% of Bulgarians speak English, and the availability of Bulgarian language material on the Internet is minimal.

Unique Applications: PC3s are a form of telecenter that feature up-front collaboration with the private sector to offer for-profit and "public good" services within a sound business plan. Launching PC3s with local entrepreneurs as partners, distributing prepaid access cards to stimulate use and reduce risks for operators, and providing hardware, technical assistance, training, and Internet connectivity subsidies demonstrate a new approach to sustainability and contribute a new model to the global telecenter repertoire.



Owner advertising his telecenter services

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